

Violence and Vulnerability

Introduction

Considerations of violence and vulnerability are central to feminist philosophy. This is unsurprising given, not only that these are heavily gendered concepts, but also that gendered experiences of violence and vulnerability affect the lives of contemporary women and men across the world. For these reasons, feminist philosophers have wanted to address ontological, phenomenological, epistemological and ethico-political questions about violence and vulnerability. In doing so, they have developed philosophical insights into a range of topics, from the fundamental nature of the western philosophical imaginary, to the production of the gendered subject, to the ethics of war and peace, to the nature and meaning of structural and symbolic violence. It is not possible to deal adequately with all of this work here. In what follows, we will focus on two areas of debate within feminist philosophical work on violence and vulnerability: first, how violence and vulnerability are and should be conceptualised; second, feminist responses to normative questions about the ethics of political violence.

Conceptualising Violence and Vulnerability

At first glance, violence and vulnerability make for a straightforward conceptual pairing. To be vulnerable is to be able to be wounded, and the most obvious form of violence is a physical act of wounding, or what Elaine Scarry refers to when describing war as a contest of ‘injuring and out-injuring’ (Scarry 1985: 63). This is certainly an understanding of the two concepts that feminist philosophers have used, often in order to draw attention to acts of wounding that have not traditionally been the focus of philosophical debate. In a collection of

essays on philosophical perspectives on violence against women, the editors ask: “ – how can there be an elaborate historical discourse on just war theory and no theory of rape or wife beating?” (French, Teays and Purdy 1998b: 1). Feminist philosophers have brought domestic and sexual violence onto the philosophical agenda as phenomena that need to be understood and evaluated as much as other forms of violence such as war fighting or torture.

However, the introduction of these topics into philosophical debate opened up problems with conceptualising violence. To the extent that mainstream analytic philosophy has been concerned with questions of violence and vulnerability, mostly within the context of debates between deontological and consequentialist approaches in applied ethics, it has tended to treat violence as a form of intentional action with specifiable consequences. On this view, violence is a tool that can be reliably used to fulfil certain purposes for an individual or collective actor. In contrast to this instrumentalist view, feminist philosophers have been sensitive to the embodied and embedded nature and experience of domestic and sexual violence, including the significance of psychological, as much as physical, wounding and injury. They have also been sensitive to the gendered social structures and discourses through which such violence may be rendered meaningful and legitimate, or even invisible, to perpetrators and victims alike. This has focused feminist attention on the meaning of violence/ vulnerability as a conceptual pairing and inspired phenomenological work on violence, in particular from the perspective of the vulnerable feminised subject. It has also led to re-conceptualisations of violence as importantly structural and discursive/ symbolic.

Feminist phenomenologies of violence have unpacked the experience of vulnerability and pointed to a whole host of ways violence can exceed the terms of descriptions that focus on the immediate results of particular physical acts of violence. Susan Brison courageously put her own experience of being the victim of murderous sexual assault onto the

philosophical agenda in order to demonstrate the limitations of standard philosophical treatments of violence: “for the first several months after my attack, I led a spectral existence, not quite sure whether I had died and the world went on without me, or whether I was alive but in a totally alien world” (Brison 1998: 17). Her work drew attention to the world-destroying effects of violence on victims, going far beyond material damage. When this was taken into account it became much more difficult to, for example, engage in consequentialist ethical calculation in which the pleasures of the rapist were balanced against the pains of the victim (Brison 1998: 14). This kind of contribution not only enriched philosophical understandings of the meaning and implications of sexual violence, it allowed for comparisons of sexual violence with other forms of violence, such as terrorism and torture (Card 2007; 2010). Moreover, it opened up a range of questions about the nature and production of gendered subjectivities, and in particular the relation between vulnerability and the feminine.

The concept of structural violence was originally used in the Neo-Marxist work of Johann Galtung. In Galtung’s case it was used to refer to ways in which people were materially damaged through poverty and deprivation under capitalism, as opposed to through intentional, individual action (Galtung 1975). Feminist work developed the concept of structural violence in a somewhat different way, to refer to the system of patriarchal domination of men over women, masculine over feminine, that produces and legitimates gendered violence and vulnerability, and in which direct, physical violence or the threat of violence is an element in the system of norms that reproduces the structure. This structural violence could be traced in the ways in which gendered subjects were socialised to be manly or womanly, so that inflicting and suffering violence were presumed as part of set gender roles. For example, Susan Brownmiller (1975) identified rape as underpinning systems of

male domination from primordial times. She argued that patriarchy was essentially a protection racket based on men's sexual predatoriness and women's fear. Catharine Mackinnon argued that violence against women was underpinned by a system of male domination in which men were the norm and women counted as less than human: "A kind of war is being fought unrecognized in a conflict that one suspects would be seen as such if men were not the aggressors and women the victims." (Mackinnon 2006: 272). Both Brownmiller and Mackinnon saw the prevalence of rape in warfare as demonstrating the ways in which sexual violence was not a matter of individual pathology, but should be understood as integral to the systematic domination of men over women. Other kinds of violence against women, from genital mutilation to the abortion of female foetuses to so-called 'honor' killings were seen as part of the same pattern (French, Teays & Purdy 1998; Dobash and Dobash 1998). In this respect, individual violences and vulnerabilities could not be understood or addressed without reference to structural violence.

Structural violence could be identified in material inequalities between men and women, which deprived many women of the power to escape from violent relationships. It could be found in social, legal and political arrangements that perpetuated men's power over women, including the power to attack and physically control them. Feminist legal theorists pointed to the longstanding (until very recently) feature of many legal systems in supposedly liberal countries which rendered rape within marriage a legal impossibility. And also to the problems surrounding the issue of 'consent' in relation to sexual violence, and the ways in which women's testimony was routinely devalued inside and outside of the courts (Pateman 1988; Kazan 1998; Mackinnon 2006). For many of these theorists, one could trace a direct link between woman's less than human status in western traditions of thought and routine domestic and sexual abuse. One could also trace a direct link – a continuum – between

routine everyday sexual and domestic violence and the organised violence of war, including systematic sexual violence.

Feminist work on structural violence pointed to the importance of discourse to the perpetuation of patriarchy and to the relative silence of philosophy on the subject of gendered violence. This led to the development of concepts of discursive or symbolic violence. These terms referred to modes of legitimating structural and physical violence through ideological gendered systems of valuation. Discursive and symbolic violence rendered direct physical violence against women unremarkable. It included ways in which domestic and sexual violence were justified in terms of nature (sexual violence is a manifestation of biological drives), privilege (control over women is a matter of male entitlement) or desert (she asked for it). It also included the host of everyday ways in which women and the feminine were denigrated and their victimisation thereby rendered simultaneously as part of common sense expectations and invisible. In this respect, feminist philosophers identified immanent links between the ways in which violent men justified their violence as acts of love, marital commitment or constructive correction (Lundgren 1998), and the ways in which philosophy, even in its critical Marxist variants, naturalised violence against women and therefore did not feel the need to subject the phenomenon to political critique or ethical justification.

We noted above that ‘violence’ tended to figure in analytic philosophy solely in instrumental terms, as a tool to be used for either good or bad ends. In contrast to this, structuralist and post-structuralist philosophy used the concept of violence to capture the primordial conditions of subjectivity, language and law. Gendered binary oppositions associate masculine with active, perpetrator, feminine with passive, victim; these generate and engender discourses and practices that valorise violent masculinities and that legitimate violence against women. This is much more than ideology in the classical Marxist sense.

Rather, these categories are given to subjects as a condition of their agency - the embodiment of gender is non-optional if a subject is to enter into the intelligible world of symbols and meaning. This non-optionality is, itself, a primary violence - in its deepest sense this is what 'symbolic violence' refers to. Looking at things this way puts gender at the root not only of sexual and domestic violence but of all forms of physical, structural and discursive violence. Feminist philosophers reacting to and building on Lacanian insights, demonstrated that the way in which the subject was produced through incorporation into the symbolic order was premised on the violent expulsion of the feminine. For thinkers such as Irigaray and Kristeva, symbolic violence therefore had a deeper meaning than as one element in a threefold combination of physical, structural and discursive gendered violence; and deeper than the justificatory function that legitimates physical and psychological violence. Here symbolic violence takes on primary philosophical and political importance.

Although their arguments are not the same, Jantzen and Reineke both relate the ubiquity of violence in western history and thought to the exclusion of radical otherness, exemplified by the inability to conceptualise what falls outside of binary oppositions between masculine and feminine, violent and vulnerable. Jantzen traces the gendered violence of the western symbolic order back to the Greeks' naturalisation of mortality and the fear of death as the grounding feature of human existence: "From militarization, death camps and genocide to exploitation, commodification and the accumulation of wealth, from the construction of pleasure and desire to the development of terminator genes, from the violence on the streets to the heaven obsessed hymnody of evangelical churches, preoccupation with death and the means of death and the combat with death is ubiquitous. It is a necrophilia so deeply a part of the western symbolic that it emerges at every turn" (Jantzen 2004: 5). Following Kristeva, Reineke argues for the need to think about symbolic and embodied gendered violence as part

of a single sacrificial economy of violence in which the scapegoating of women is historically repeated in phenomena such as the European witch hunts (Reineke 1997).

Most feminist work on violence recognises that structural and symbolic violence are part of what violence means. Nevertheless, for some feminists, the turn to symbolic violence, in particular in work influenced by psychoanalysis, undermines feminist engagements with the lived experience of physical violence. It collapses too much under the umbrella of the concept of violence and focuses too much attention on discourse and language. And it thereby detracts from feminist attempts to bring specific gendered violences and vulnerabilities onto the philosophical agenda. Moreover, its holistic approach to the meaning of violence for feminists makes it difficult to unpack the precise links between different aspects of violence and seems to make an escape from symbolic violence and its gendered violent consequences extremely difficult. Jantzen argues for the denaturalisation of death and violence in the western philosophical and political imaginary, and its replacement with a 'poetics of natality', in which the maternal principle of life-giving underpins the symbolic order. Reineke argues for the embrace of Kristeva's category of the 'uncanny' as a way to escape the sacrificial economy of violence. But it is not clear how the deconstruction and reconstruction required could be played out in practice in a world still dominated by all of the violences that these thinkers trace back to the western symbolic order. The distinct, more materialist, positions of thinkers such as Brownmiller, which trace gendered violence back to a pre-historical protection racket are similarly overwhelming and appear to make escape and resistance next to impossible.

There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of response to the analyses of feminist philosophers who make, in Reineke's terms, a gendered economy of violence fundamental to the world we inhabit. The first response challenges the focus of feminist philosophers on

women or other feminised actors as the *victims* of violence, particularly sexual violence. Responding specifically to Brownmiller, Burton argues that the latter, in helpfully demonstrating the systematic nature of violence against women also, much less helpfully, generalises women's position as one of fear and victimhood. For Burton, the focus on victimhood potentially undermines women's capacity for resistance in ways that are effectively complicit with masculinist identifications of feminine with vulnerability. She argues for more philosophical attention to be paid to women's capacity for agency and resistance, including the capacity to fight back (Burton 1998). From this point of view, the focus on women's victimisation perpetuates a long-term bias in the western philosophical tradition against women's agency and autonomy, and arguably an equally long term silence about women and other feminised actors as practitioners, not just victims, of violence.

The idea that women's capacity to resist or fight may be tied to women's capacity for autonomy opens up a new set of questions in feminist philosophy in relation to violence. In the work of thinkers such as Brownmiller or Mackinnon, it is clearly the case that vulnerability, meaning vulnerability to violence, is a bad thing, a source of fear and, for Brownmiller, the origin of women's oppression by men across all times and places. In these analyses, violence and vulnerability go together historically, phenomenologically and ethically, and are explicitly identified with the feminine/ women. In contrast to this, Bar On (2002: 149-166) explores how feminised bodies are reproduced as violent bodies, in the context of discussing the production of her own embodied existence as a young Israeli and practitioner of Martial Arts. She refers back to Beauvoir's discussion of how the upbringing of girls and boys divides at the point at which adolescent boys undergo a 'real apprenticeship' in violence and girls cease to participate in physical games (Beauvoir 1997a: 353). Beauvoir emphasises how the embodied experience of fighting enables the boy to feel that his will

impacts on the world. Bar On draws attention to ways in which violence may be experienced as positively liberating for women, and yet is also part of the story of the gendered economy of violence, both in helping to reproduce nationalist, patriarchal structures of power and in being identified and experienced as transgressive. The association of women with the use of violence, whether to resist an attacker or sustain identification with a nationalist project, displaces the terms of the violence/ vulnerability binary analytically and normatively. It associates violence with the feminine and disturbing a necessary link between the feminine and vulnerability and by potentially re-valuing violence as a positive affirmation of autonomy.

However, from the point of view of other feminist philosophers, this kind of response is mistaken because it keeps the masculinist hierarchy in place by continuing to privilege violence over vulnerability. Bar On's own analysis draws attention to how gendered structural and symbolic violence is perpetuated through the participation of women as well as men, in the enforcement of normative expectations through physically violent as well as other means. An alternative response accepts neither the inescapability of a gendered economy of violence nor the revaluation of violence from a feminist perspective. Instead, it challenges the dominant way of conceiving the meaning of *vulnerability* as the correlate of violence. For these feminist thinkers, it is the myth of a link between violence and *invulnerability*, celebrated by western ideals of the autonomous masculine subject that is the problem. The way beyond the gendered economy of violence is to recognise the absurdity of the idea of *invulnerability* and to start from *vulnerability* as the common and prior condition of the production of the human subject.

We find this move in a range of distinct feminist philosophical positions. For example in various versions of maternalist and care ethics (Ruddick 1990; Held 1993; 2006) and in work

more influenced by continental and psychoanalytic feminist philosophy (Cavarero 2007; Butler 2004; 2009). This work extends the meaning of vulnerability beyond vulnerability to violence. In being paired with ‘invulnerability’, we come to understand vulnerability as much more broadly to do with the permeability of the boundaries between embodied subjects, the inherent relationality of subjects, and the capacity of subjects to be affected in general, not only through violent assault (Mackenzie 2014). Thought about in this way, vulnerability has become foundational for some feminist ethical and political theorising. For example, Fineman’s work building on her influential article, “The Vulnerable Subject” (Fineman 2008; Fineman and Grear 2013) and a developing focus on vulnerability within feminist applied ethics and bioethics, (Mackenzie, Rogers and Dodds 2014). The latter literature has strong links with feminist accounts of relational autonomy as well as with the ethics of care. It rejects the rather generalised account of vulnerability to be found in Fineman’s work and seeks to conceptualise vulnerability in ways that distinguish between vulnerability as a general ontological condition shared by all, and vulnerability as specific to situations of liability to harm. This is in order to show how different moral obligations follow from different aspects of vulnerability and to underline the point that vulnerability is neither good nor bad in itself. (Mackenzie 2014; Dodds 2014).

Few feminist philosophers uncritically embrace the identification of autonomy with violence, or read vulnerability in wholly positive terms. In general feminist thinkers remain convinced of the link between the devaluation of women in western thought, and also in other cultural traditions, and their specific vulnerabilities to domestic and sexual violence, and identify a continuum between gendered violence in domestic contexts and the systematic violences of states and other collective actors. However, the questioning of the necessity of the link between the feminine and vulnerability to violence creates different kinds of possibilities for

feminist normative judgment in relation to women's own violence and to organized political violence. Feminists remain united in their condemnation of sexual and domestic violence, but they are much less united when it comes to the moral and political judgement of war and resistant violence.

Feminism and the Ethics of Political Violence

Feminist philosophical arguments about political violence are always influenced by political context as well as by the philosophical presuppositions embedded in particular feminist positions. Feminist pacifist positions formulated in the 1980s were in part responding to an escalation of the nuclear arms race, and to developments such as the women-only peace camp at Greenham Common. They also intersected with the political construction of 'violence against women' as a primary focus for feminist political organisation and action, and the phenomena of sexual and gender violence, as we have seen, turned philosophical and ethical analysis away from a model of intentional physical action and its consequential injury or resistance, to a more complex model of structural and symbolic violence and hence the implication of violence in the very heart of identity and agency. More recently, feminist revisiting of just war theory has been largely a response to the growth of military humanitarian interventions since the 1990s, the 'War on Terror', and specifically the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The ways in which state rhetoric has focused on women's human rights as a justification for various kind of intervention has provoked strong criticism from feminist activists and philosophers. In particular, feminist have been critical of military humanitarian intervention and the 'War on Terror', which perpetuated a politics of rescue in which white western men 'save', in Spivak's words, brown women from brown men (Bar On 2008a).

At the beginning of the First World War, western feminist movements were divided between nationalist and pacifist positions. In the work of Jane Addams, who embraced a pacifist position, one can identify themes in the analysis of war that have continued to work through feminist thought about war and other forms of organised political violence ever since (Addams, Balch and Hamilton 2003). Addams challenged prevailing views about war by bringing gender into her analysis of nationalism, militarism, the logic of violence and myths of chivalry and heroism. She was concerned about the structural effects of war on society in times of both war and peace, and how nationalist and militarist agendas were linked to the oppression of populations and in the gendered presuppositions and effects of war. Over the past century, feminist scholars have followed Addams by systematically demonstrating that gendered identities are fundamental to the meaning and practice of war (Elshtain 1987; Harris and King 1993; Kinsella 2011). Feminists have documented the gendered presuppositions and consequences of war, the ways in which war is embedded in and reproduces gendered political, economic and ideological structures, and the continuum between the organised violence of the state and inter-personal violence at a domestic level. However, there has been no philosophical or political consensus as to whether the intimate links between organised political violence and gendered violence and oppression means that feminists must necessarily be pacifists (Frazer and Hutchings 2014).

Feminist pacifism has had different philosophical roots. Earlier western feminists were inspired by Christian, deontological positions, following thinkers such as Tolstoy and later Gandhi. During the latter part of the Cold War, as part of the increasing importance of maternalist and radical feminisms, pacifism was linked to the valorisation of feminine principles of life-giving and peacemaking in opposition to the destructive logic of masculinist war-making. Some feminists made the case that feminism necessarily implied pacifism

(Carroll 1987). Sarah Ruddick's work developed a philosophically sophisticated version of a maternalist, care ethics position on violence (1990; 1993): "Caregivers are not, predictably, better people than are militarists. Rather, they are engaged in a different project. Militarists aim to dominate by creating the structural vulnerabilities that caregivers take for granted. They arm and train so that they can, if other means of domination fail, terrify and injure their opponents. By contrast, in situations where domination through bodily pain, and the fear of pain, is a structural possibility, caregivers try to resist temptations to assault and neglect, even though they work among smaller, frailer, vulnerable people who may excite domination." (Ruddick 1993: 121)

It is clear from the above quotation that Ruddick sees a different attitude towards *vulnerability* as fundamental to an alternative ethics of war. For Ruddick, both militarism and just war theory share a commitment to the expendability of concrete lives in abstract causes to which maternal thinking is inherently opposed. Ruddick claims that this means that the implication of maternal thinking is not just the rejection of war but the active embracing of peace politics, a fight against war which draws on the acknowledgement of responsibility and relationship and the specificity of need and obligations which are inherent in a proper understanding of the labour of caring (Ruddick 1990, 141-159). Although Ruddick argues that maternal thinking is aligned to the idea of non-violence, she is also insistent that it is sensitive to the specific contexts in which ethical dilemmas are embedded. For Ruddick, ethical judgment has to be on a case by case basis, but without ready-made principles of adjudication. Although the idea of maternal thinking is in principle non-violent, there are no universally applicable algorithms that can be applied to any given situation to render definitive answers to ethical questions, so that even the use of violence cannot be entirely ruled out a priori (Ruddick 1990: 138). Ruddick gives two examples of where it would be

inappropriate to condemn violence out of hand, both of them are examples of resistant violence towards racist, militarist regimes in Nazi Germany and South Africa respectively.

Ruddick's reluctance to embrace a wholly pacifist position links her argument to an alternative feminist tradition of thinking about the ethics of resistant political violence, in which the arguments of Beauvoir and Arendt are more influential than care ethics. For both Beauvoir and Arendt, the circumstances of the Second World War and of anti-colonial struggles demonstrated that resistant violence was sometimes morally and politically required. In her *Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir examined consequentialist justifications of revolutionary violence. Although she demonstrated the problems with these kinds of moral calculation, she also argued that it was no more possible to rule violence out absolutely than it was to provide an ethical argument for its ethical or political necessity (Beauvoir 1997b). Her conclusions emphasised the importance of context and the impossibility of establishing a 'pure' moral position on the question of the use of violence.

Arendt famously argued that violence could not be legitimate, but might in some cases be justifiable. It might be justifiable as being the only way to address an injustice at either individual or collective levels. For example in an individual act of violence to defend the vulnerable innocent, or in a just war against an enemy such as the Nazi regime. On the other hand, the use of violence could not be legitimate because it was ultimately a purely instrumental action, in contrast to genuinely political power, and the most likely outcome of the use of violence was more violence (Arendt 1969). Beauvoir's arguments about political violence were not formulated explicitly as part of her feminist philosophy, and Arendt famously distanced her own work from feminism. Nevertheless, these two philosophers, and Arendt in particular have been important for contemporary feminist philosophers, especially those influenced by postcolonial thought, who are convinced by the antithetical relation

between feminist values and the use of violence, and yet reluctant to rule out political violence from the repertoire of feminist action altogether (Bar On 2002; Hutchings 2007).

This ambivalence about the relation between feminism and political violence has also been manifested in some feminist attempts to re-work just war theory (Peach 1994; Sjoberg 2006; Held 2008a; 2008b; Eide 2008). Virginia Held introduces the values of care as a supplement to more traditional, deontological and utilitarian criteria, for the moral assessment of war. At one level, in the light of the feminist ethic of care the presumption against the use of violence as an effective way of responding to injustice is very strong and implies a commitment to developing alternatives to the use of violence: “We should seek to restrain rather than destroy those who become violent, we should work to prevent violence rather than wipe out violent persons, and we should contain violence as non-violently as possible.” (2008b: 4) Held also acknowledges that to the extent that one is making moral judgements about justice *ad bellum* and *in bello*, then one is neglecting the moral evaluation of all of the other aspects of warfare that feminist scholarship had brought to our attention, in terms of its material and ideological conditions and effects beyond the field of battle. Her response to this is to subsume the above concerns, specific to the ethic of care, largely to holistic or ‘long term’ evaluation, whilst admitting more familiar consequentialist and deontological moral principles as still adequate for the evaluation of moral dilemmas relating to immediate judgment and action before and during war.

Held attempts to operationalise the values inherent in care, grounded in a common vulnerability, whilst at the same time enabling feminist judgment about specific uses of organised violence, in particular for humanitarian ends. One obvious problem with her argument is the tension it perpetuates between the specifically feminist ethic of care and its orientation towards non-violence, and traditional consequentialist and deontological modes of

moral theorising. The two are only made compatible by assigning care ethics to long term matters and just war theory to immediate judgments about specific uses of violence. Bar On, speaking from a non-pacifist position suggests another problem and criticises Held, not because Held is arguing that uses of violence may sometimes be justified in feminist terms, but because she attempts to do this by reference back to pure *moral* theory. Bar On argues that questions about the use of violence for political ends are fundamentally political questions and need to be open to political contestation, they are simply not resolvable at the level of philosophy (Bar On 2008b). The philosophical difficulties raised by Held's arguments reflect two broader problems encountered by feminists addressing the ethics of organized political violence: first, how specifically feminist insights are to be operationalised for the purposes of moral judgement; second, how feminists ought to think about the relation between ethics and politics when it comes to the judgement of political violence.

Although it is very differently grounded, Butler's recent work, in which she argues for a link between corporeal vulnerability and the appeal of non-violence, grapples with similar problems concerning the operationalising of feminist insights for prescriptive purposes and the relation between ethics and politics in the judgment of violence. Butler responds to the first problem by rejecting the idea of a *necessary* link between the recognition of vulnerability and a normative ethics of non-violence. Nevertheless, following aspects of Levinas's ethics, she locates a 'claim' of non-violence in the shared 'precarity' of human existence (2009: 166-184). In this respect, Butler's notion of vulnerability means that we are all, as a primary condition of our embodied existence, open equally to violence and non-violence. However, this is a shared condition that is denied by violent responses, which shore up the fantasy of the invulnerability of the violent subject, and that is affirmed by non-violent responses, which recognise an underlying equality of exposure of all subjects regardless of

power relations between them. In this respect, the role of ethics in Butler's writings on political violence is fundamentally bound up with politics, since there is no recognition of others outside of frames and power relations that produce us in different, including gendered ways. Rather than attempting to resolve feminist dilemmas about the judgment of political violence by seeking to generate prescriptive consequences from philosophical presuppositions, or by giving priority to ethics over politics, Butler leaves those dilemmas firmly in place.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we would like to suggest that the philosophical difficulties encountered by feminists in coming to ethical conclusions about the justice of various forms of political violence is precisely a reflection of the power of the insights feminists have generated into the nature and meaning of violence and vulnerability. In this respect, feminist work on violence and vulnerability acts as Butler argues non-violence acts, that is to say as a spanner in the works of the philosophical apparatuses through which violence has been made to appear necessary and legitimate in contexts from the bedroom to the battlefield (Butler 2009: 183-4). Once you start to unpack not only the way in which violence is gendered, but also how violence reproduces gender, at all levels from that of subjective identity to that of the nation-state. And once you start to unpack the possibilities inherent in taking vulnerability rather than violence as a starting point for thought, it becomes much more difficult to reduce violence to a tool or to engage in any kind of cost-benefit analysis of its conditions and effects in any particular instance. This does not mean that feminists must be pacifists, but it does mean that feminists who are and are not pacifists both accept the impossibility of any clean resolution to questions about who has the right to kill or injure whom.

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